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album review

Roman Candle
The Wee Hours Revue

[V2; 2006]

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In some circles, Roman Candle have been one of the great unsubstantiated rumors of modern pop-rock. The Chapel Hill quintet's whip-smart 2002 LP *Says Pop* earned them a dedicated cult following, although it did little for their national profile: Hollywood Records furnished promos to critics, but never quite managed to get the record into stores. *The Wee Hours Revue* gives *Says Pop* a fresh coat of gloss courtesy of producer Chris Stamey, and new song "I Can't Even Recall", a languorous slow-burner in the vein of Van Morrison.

Stamey was a savvy choice: We already know from his overhaul of Whiskeytown's debut, *Faithless Street*, that he's adept at helping good songs hampered by uneven recordings achieve their full potential -- not to mention that Whiskeytown is the North Carolina band Roman Candle most resembles, although they're informed more by soul than country. While this is a passionate record (the word "baby" practically deserves an instrumental credit), Skip Matheny doesn't emote with alt-country's cowboy melisma. He belts out tough, full-bodied syllables with the barest intimation of a ragged edge. *Says Pop*'s unimpeachable melodies couldn't be contained by the occasionally tinny recording, but couched in Stamey's amply spacious production, they're explosive.

Instead of resting on the laurels of authenticity its direct, earnest songwriting would garner from some corners, *The Wee Hours Revue* aims for broader appeal by combining it with detail-oriented pop production. The percussion is remarkably crisp and buoyant, holding the crunchy snarls of guitar, spangles of Rhodes organ, and Matheny's towering voice effortlessly aloft. Pithy structural embellishments speak to the band's interest in various qualities of recorded sound -- the muffled drum section prefixing the bright acoustic lope of "You Don't Belong to This World", for instance, or the glitchy percussive overture that bursts seamlessly into the soul meltdown "Another Summer"; the ambient static that Victrolas up the bittersweet cellos of "I Can't Even Recall" and the film-projector whir that sets the stage for the splashy ballad "Baby's Got It in the Genes".

These sharp compositional choices are also manifest in Methany's finely-drawn lyrics-- they create specific senses of place, situated at that nexus of lament and joy that's so much more stirring than either alone. On "Something Left to Say", summer is evoked by "pollen on the beer bottles in the garbage cans." On "New York This Morning", a city "where father and son relations just deepen like a coastal shelf" looms vividly, by way of pigeons on a savings and loan and candles at St. Patrick's cathedral. Such visual flair permeates the songs -- a kid playing guitar by the subway "rolls a toothpick in his mouth," a strange woman packs "cigarettes against her wrist," and "an old button down with a cigarette scar" evokes a Proustian reverie.

Like its namesake, Roman Candle coaxes incandescence from humble origins, and in this context, it's worth making the distinction between Southern Rock and rock that happens to be played by Southerners. The South, here, isn't about reconstructed stereotypes, and it isn't an end point. It's a literal space in which universal hopes and anxieties -- lost love, homesickness and wanderlust -- play out against robust pop-rock aerobics. You can check your dualie and shotgun rack at the door.

— Brian Howe, September 11, 2006

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2. No Line on the Horizon
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4. Paul's Boutique
5. It's Not Me, It's You
6. March of the Zapotec / Holland
7. The Century of Self
8. Hold Time
9. Wavvves
10. Incredibad
11. Middle Cyclone
12. 200 Million Thousand
13. Invaders Must Die
14. The Spirit of Apollo
15. Super Roots 10
16. Extra Cheese EP
17. Keep It Hid
18. Afro Samurai Resurrection
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9. Beasts of Seasons
10. All Aboard Future
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12. I Blame You
13. Coward
14. To Lose My Life...
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